UXPin

Zen of White Space in Web UI Design

Balance, Contrast, Hierarchy

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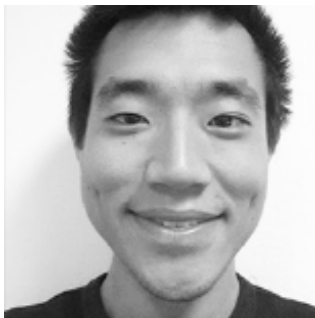Balance, Contrast, Hierarchy

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Jerry Cao is a UX Content Strategist at UXPin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Brafton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts.
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Jake is a writer and designer with a focus on interface design for the web. He often writes about W3C specs and the newest trends in web design. You can find out more on his portfolio or view his latest design work on Dribbble.

Introduction

From time immemorial white space has been incorporated into all forms of art & design. But in the past few decades this subject has diverged into another road: the road of digital design.

The Internet has become a powerful means of communication incorporating many of the same principles found in traditional graphic design. Website layouts are built to handle user interaction, but they're also designed to look good.

White space(also known as **negative space**) is a key component to designing a layout which is both beautiful and usable. All the greatest website layouts incorporate proper white space values into all page elements from header to footer.

Although it can be a complicated subject, it's easier to learn once you dive in. This book will guide designers by covering the fundamentals of white space on the web through live examples of pristine layouts.

Theory is always great but there's no substitute for studying examples & getting some real-world practice.

The reason white space is so difficult to comprehend is because you're looking at something which you can't directly see, while trying to figure out how it impacts what you *can* see. Once you train your eye to recognize white space on the web it'll become like second nature – and like the magnificent elephant you'll never forget it.

We hope you find this book helpful, and if you enjoy it, feel free to share it.

For the love of UI design,
Jake Rocheleau & Jerry Cao

Negative Space on the Web

The colloquial understanding of digital white space is "the space between stuff on the page".

Since the space doesn't actually need to be colored white, perhaps it makes more sense to use the term "negative space" instead. The term originates from traditional art where someone might draw or paint the negative space around an object to capture the shape more accurately.

Source: WeAreC2

In this book, you'll see both terms used interchangeably.

Each website is the digital representation of an interface. Buttons, links, text, and other media all need room to breathe much like you'd expect in a good portrait. Space improves the overall composition and is often seen as a "big picture" concept.

But white space can also be used between smaller objects like text or image thumbnails. Space will often speak more about individual elements rather than the page as a whole. It's all one big microcosm of a macrocosm: the little things always affect the big picture.

In this piece, we'll quickly deconstruct the various types of white space, then explain the application and aesthetic properties of each style.

tweet this   Every website is the digital representation of an interface.

A Breakdown of White Space

There are a few different styles of white space to be found in website layouts. These examples were listed in our other book *Interaction Design Best Practices*, but to save time we've summarized them below.

1. **3 Main Types of White Space**

    *   **Compositional White Space** – Space for margins, padding, and general composition.

    *   **Visual White Space** – Space for graphics, icons, buttons, or form elements.

    *   **Textual White Space** – Space between headers/paragraphs and lines of text.

For an example, let's consider the generic image carousel. The carousel itself needs compositional white space above and below to separate it from other elements on the page.

Inside the carousel is an image or multiple image thumbnails. Padding is used between thumbnails and between the primary image to create a visual distance. We call this "visual white space" because visual elements are a mid-way between the macro composition design and the micro content style. Regardless of carousel size, white space should be used between internal elements to alleviate clutter and offer some visual breathing room.
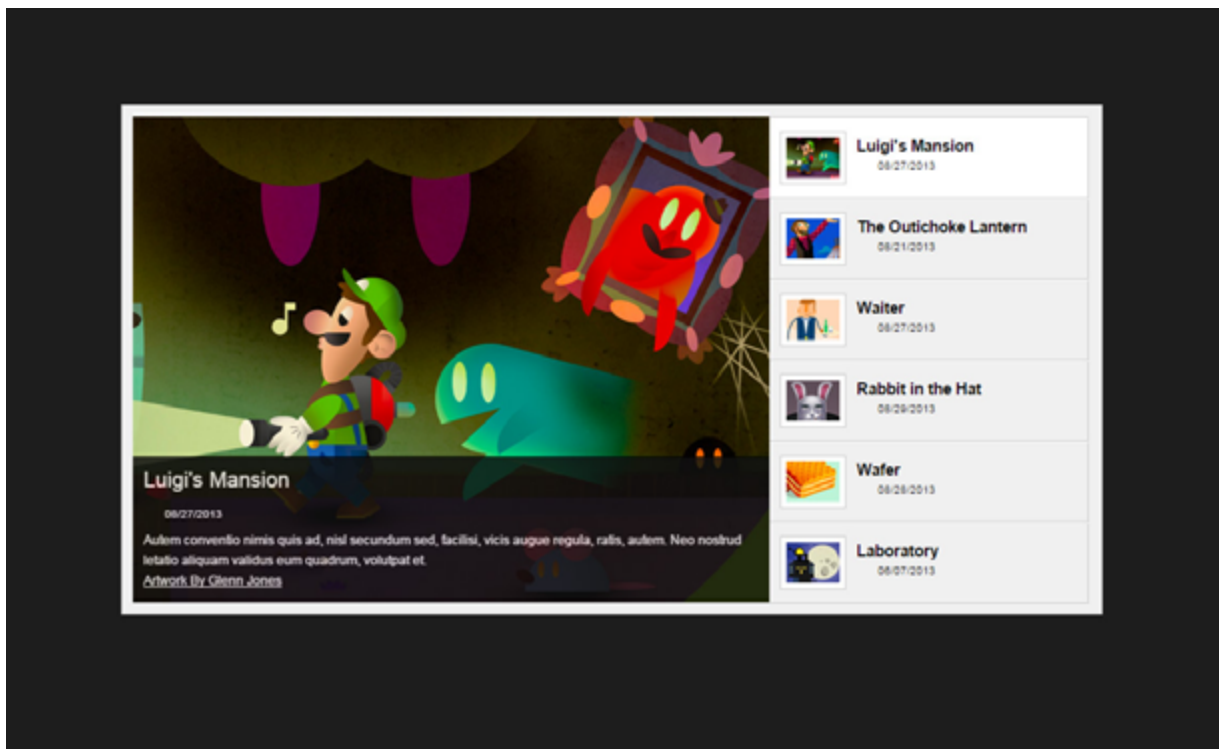
Source: DesignM.ag via Jake Rocheleau.

The screenshot above is from a Designm.ag image carousel tutorial which integrates these various styles of white space. The carousel itself is centered on the page to draw attention using compositional white space. Inside the carousel, all of the thumbnails use visual white space to create a grouped list of carousel content. Similarly the larger preview image takes up a majority of the carousel so as to immediately catch your eye.

Digging even further, you'll notice textual white space between text in the black image description box. The header text "Luigi's Mansion" uses plenty of space above and below, while the paragraph text acts as more of a block element. Also, notice how textual white space is used between thumbnail images & their titles (like "Waiter") in the right-hand column.

As you can imagine, it's pretty common to find a hierarchy of white space even within simple page elements. Granted, not every element on the page will use all styles of space, but almost every page will incorporate all of these styles somewhere in the layout.
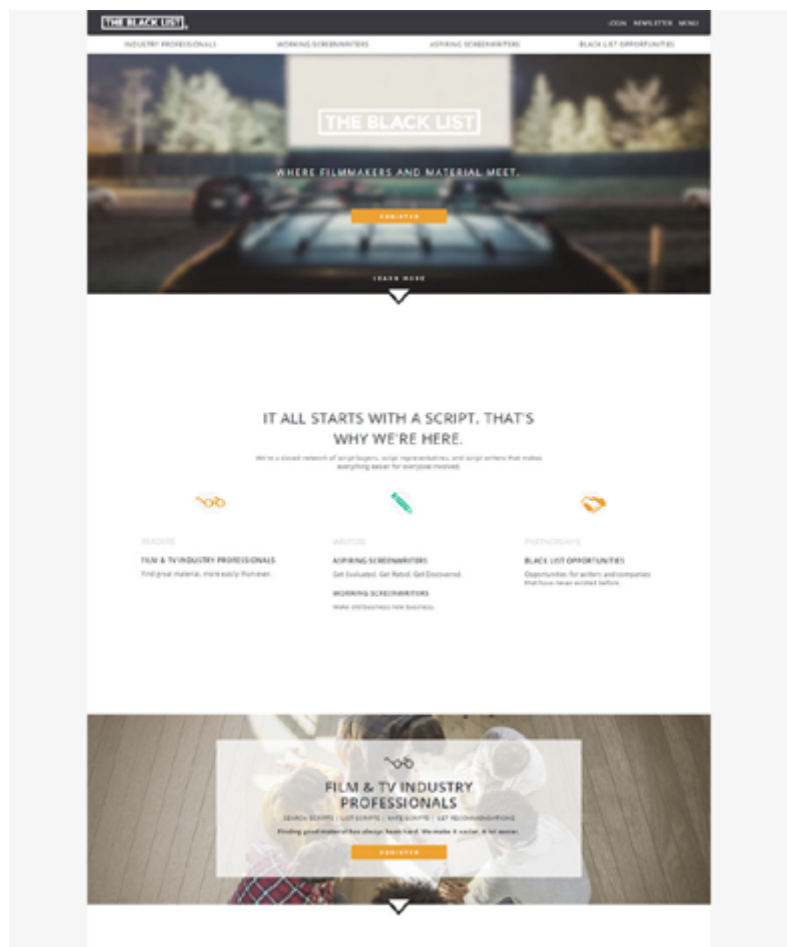
2. Macro & Micro White Space

All styles of white space can be broken down into 2 main categories: **micro** white space and **macro** white space. Great websites incorporate both categories into a layout design.

Macro white space is found when looking at the whole design from a macroscopic level. This may be colloquially referred to as "the big picture" where compositional white space takes a leading focus. Designers usually start a new web project by first creating a wireframe or prototype which visually demonstrates macro white space on the page.
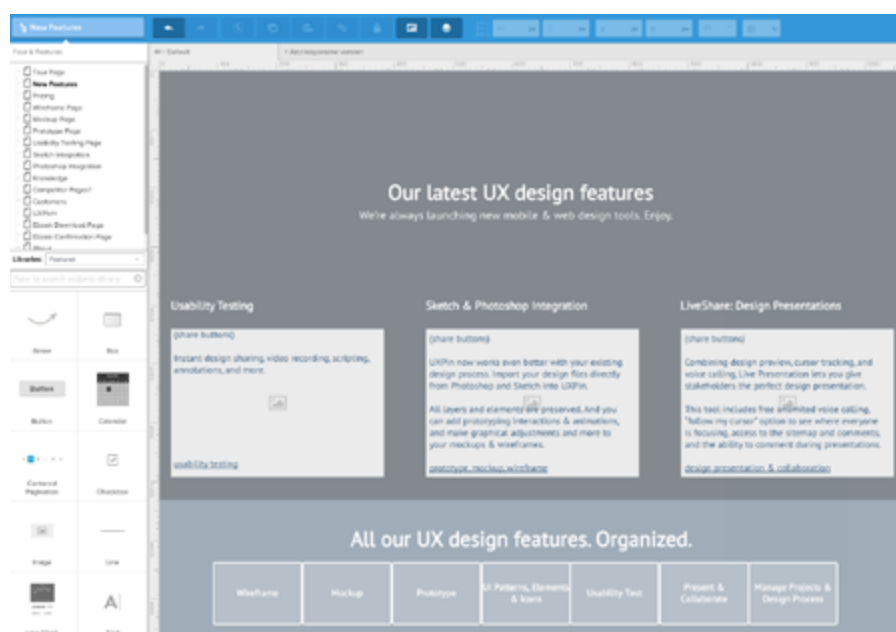
Source: UXPin

In the above wireframe from our site redesign project, you should notice that each section is denoted by separate background colors. It's easy to see where page elements are located and how much white space should be used between them. Macro white space is visible on every single website, but it can be hard to see without looking at the full layout.

Source: The Black List

The Black List uses a long and well-spaced homepage design. If you take a look at the whole composition, you'll begin to recognize major sections of the page. These different sections use macro white space to create distance from other areas, and micro white space to create internal relationships between content.

Micro white space is what handles space between all the little page elements. These elements include navigation links, image galleries, unordered lists, and page headers. Micro white space can be used with media like images/icons(visual white space) or with text like headers/paragraphs(textual white space).


Source: UXPin

Like most detailed layouts, the above wireframe showcases both macro and micro white space together. Macro white space exists between each of the large page sections, while micro white space is found between the internal page content.

For example, micro white space is used for margins between the headers and paragraph text. It's also used to create padding around the wireframe's logo and to create space between the buttons in the header section.
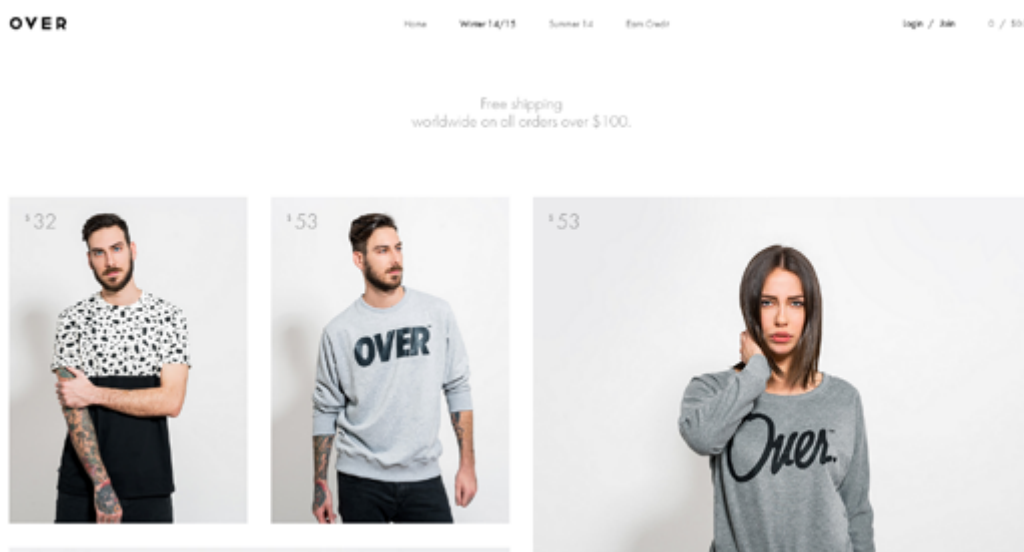
How to Apply White Space

Every website uses space differently based on the purpose of the content.
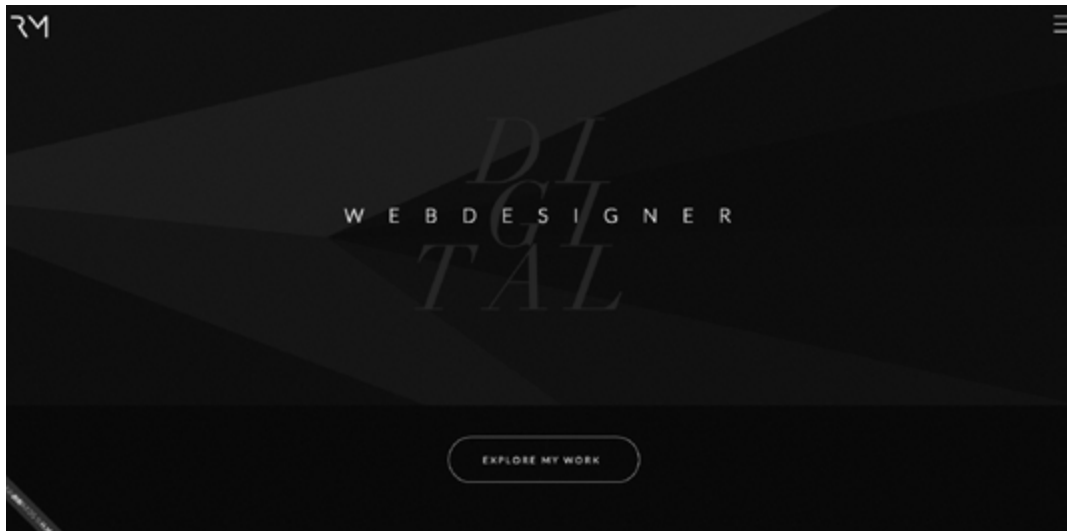
Source: Raphael Malka

For example, a landing page may leave plenty of negative space because the focus is mostly on a call-to-action button (download button or "Learn More" type of button, as you can see above).

Source: Over Clothing

On the contrary, an eCommerce store like **Over Clothing** has a lot more content which needs to be squeezed into a layout. There will still be a need for white space but it probably won't be as lavishly care-free as you'd find in a simple landing page.

The bottom line is that white space should be used within context, which means there aren't many hard-and-fast rules to apply onto every website. But here are some general tips to keep in mind:

- **Get a feel for each website and its organization** – In fact, designer Paul Boag suggests you limit a page to 15 points of attention. For each item you add to the interface, subtract one point.

- **Compare your ideas with other similar designs** – Consider how other designers put together white space in layouts. For example, this gallery from awwwards is a fantastic starting point.

- **Understand that content relationships are defined by surrounding white space** – Passive white space creates breathing room, while active white space leads users eye's towards relevant content.

Now, let's dive a little deeper into the spatial elements of white space and how to apply it practically.

1. **Spatial Design Features**
    Composition is the gestalt. It's the whole website which arises from the sum of its parts. To fully understand what works and why, you must study white space from a compositional and microscopic level.
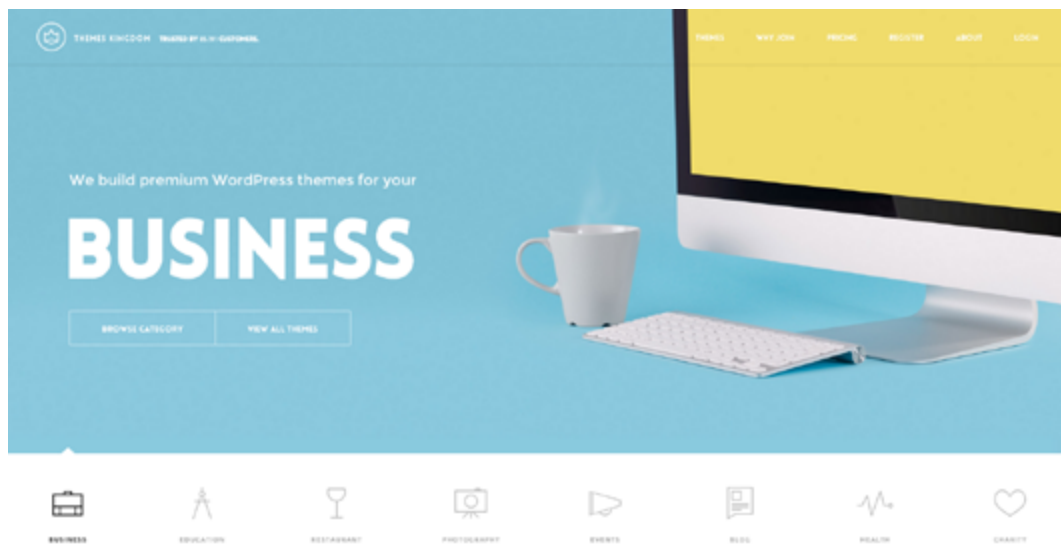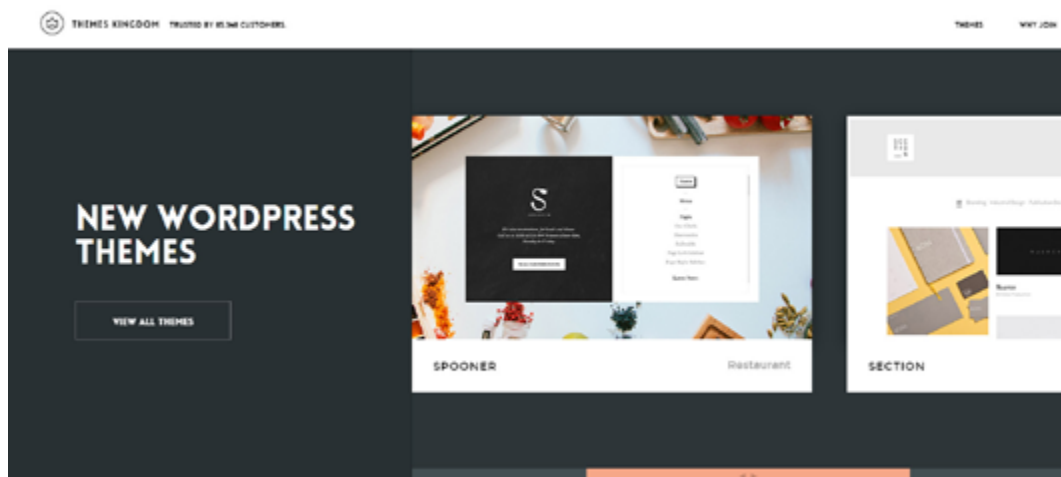
Source: Themes Kingdom

Themes Kingdom is a good example because their layout uses a variety of different spatial elements for different reasons. The negative space found between top navigation links (shown above) feels more compact than the space between block elements on the bottom of the homepage. Nav links are crammed into a closely-packed navbar, the text is smaller, and the links feel like a more subtle piece of the header. On the other hand Themes Kingdom uses many big links with extra padding lower on the page. These links feel more spacious and captivating in comparison to the smaller navbar.

Although the navigation links are smaller, they still come across as one large collection of links. White space for grouped elements should be used to convey similarities of links. To forge a close relationship between content it's a good idea to float elements side-by-side. Take for example the various theme category links found directly underneath the header. These links are quaint yet distinct featuring thin line icons for aesthetic appeal.

To fully understand white space, you must study it from a compositional and microscopic level.

As described in *Web UI Design for the Human Eye*, the laws of Gestalt dictate that objects in closer proximity will appear as one "unit" whereby the white space acts as a visual cue.

Source: Themes Kingdom

But other items like the theme gallery widget are meant to be spaced out. More space between the text and images (combined with a contrasting color) forces visitors to draw their attention to that gallery widget since nothing else is distracting. It's a handy little technique for links, buttons, or featured content where you'd like to see more user interactivity.

Portfolio sites are another great source of white space inspiration since designers take great care to frame their work with taste and sensibility. A great website design wraps all of this visual information in a spectacular gift box.
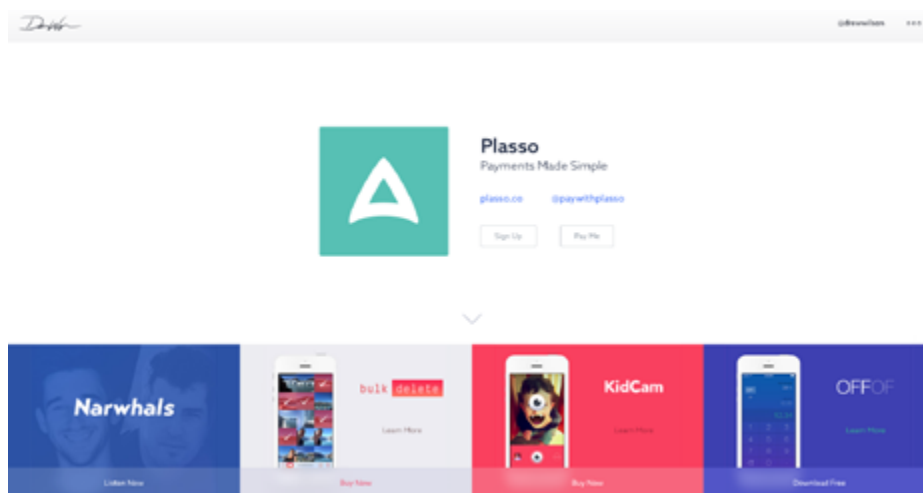
Source: Drew Wilson

While there are many great examples available, we recommend checking out Drew Wilson's website. The white space on his portfolio is based entirely on the content structure to enhance certain blocks of text & imagery.

His layout is also meant to be a single-page design. Without extra pages, all of the content is forced into a small layout which requires a keen sense of white space and compositional balance.

You should notice that his website doesn't just rely on typography, color, space, animation, or any other single design technique. All of these principles are combined together so that they fit quite naturally into the overall layout.

2. Pragmatic Application

Although each website design is unique, you should always pair white space with other design techniques that work well off each other.

Here's some more tips for practically applying white space:

- **Variety is a good thing** – Some areas may need less white space, others may need a lot more. Go with the flow and rely on your designer's intuition.

- **Prioritize legibility and readability** – Before you start designing, create an interface inventory to assess the scope of your content. Once you're done, try creating some rough content wireframes to assess how much space is required for legibility (how well you can discern the letters and words) and readability (how well you can scan the content).

- **Break out of the vacuum** – Use contrasting colors, disparative font sizes, and asymmetrical white space to add extra style into a layout. Understand that white space is a reactive design element and affects the perception of all surrounding elements.

The application of white space is both aesthetic and pragmatic. It affects digital design just like it would affect a painting – but a website is not a painting. A website is meant to be touched, clicked, scrolled, and used by as many people as possible.

Pragmatic white space creates a structure around content which is vital to the success of any design. Take a peek at why whitespace matters to learn more about designing space for content.

Aesthetic Properties of White Space

Delving more into the design side of white space requires other fundamental UI design principles. These often relate to similar principles found in graphic design, all of which tie into the overall composition.

White space plays an important role in the final composition because it exists in every layout style, whether it's for a minimalist design agency or a global ecommerce retailer. Of course it's okay to follow a style of minimalism but this isn't always the best choice for all web projects. Treat white space as a thankless design element, because you can gauge its success by how much people *don't* recognize it.
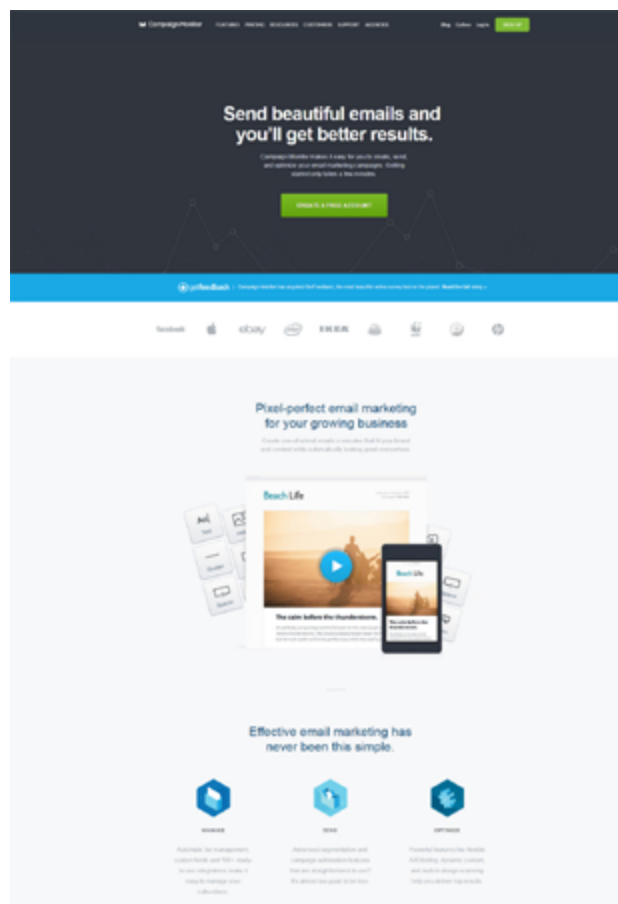
Source: Campaign Monitor

Campaign Monitor has an interesting homepage with generous white space. The whole layout flows very naturally and moves in a rhythmic vertical pattern. While scrolling along the website, you definitely feel compelled to move down further.

By combining white space with its unique color scheme of greens, whites, and greys, the design creates a natural visual storytelling effect. Page sections are also created at full-width so they take up 100% of the horizontal space, further immersing the user. The "chunking" effect appears when scrolling because the different background colors create the illusion of different blocks on the page.

White space amplifies this effect because it forces visitors to focus on each area with a high degree of attention, isolating each "chunk" from the others. So not only is there a lot of space between page blocks, there's also plenty of space between icons and text. While Campaign Monitor could be considered somewhat minimal, it most definitely uses other design features like vibrant images to draw attention.

To summarize, remember that:

• White space serves both content and design style.

• Space between large areas of content will appear like page divisions.

• Extra padding around a particular segment of content forces visitor's attention onto that area because there's nothing else on screen to draw attention.

Source: *Exposure*

You'll find a similar effect on the homepage of Exposure. Their layout focuses more on typography with unique typefaces and oversized text. In this design, it's apparent that content dominates the creative theme.

But what's interesting is that contrast also plays a large role in the text's design. You'll notice right away that most text on the page is clearly readable, recognizable, and stands out from a distance. The crisp contrast between the typographic styles (like bolding and cursive) and sparse background easily distinguishes white space from content.

Contrasted color is a powerful tool when used in conjunction with other design fundamentals. Like we discussed in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, contrast is the use of two colors which compliment each other in a vibrant yet satisfying manner. By contrasting text or content sections, the white space on Exposure's homepage feels

twice as loud. The elements are crisp so you notice when they're on screen – and you notice when they're not.

Source: Exposure

You'll also notice this effect on Exposure's web form and photos lower in the homepage. These elements are designed in a way as to clearly stand out and be recognized while scrolling. Studies have shown that unimpressed users can leave a site after 10-20 seconds, but the design & content structure often changes people's minds.

Takeaway

What is great about all of these examples is that they incorporate white space properly. You'll notice that space isn't just used for flashy gimmicks or extra icons(although it can be). Space distinguishes between content areas, or to lump bits of content together. Great web design should look great, but it must also communicate purpose.

As Brad Frost suggests in his responsive redesign of Techcrunch, treat white space as subtractive sculpture. White space is not an empty canvas, but a powerful design tool. Use it to carve out all the sections of a website.

How big should the navigation links be? Should they be aligned horizontally or vertically? How much space is required? The answers will be different on each project, but the outcome must be a clearly defined relationship between all navigational objects and content elements.

Creating Visual Hierarchy

We all know about hierarchies in the real world. These can be found in royal lines such as dukes and duchesses, prince and princes, or kings and queens.

Designers use hierarchy to express relationships in a similar manner. Just like a king is higher-ranking than a prince, an H1 section must look as though it ranks higher than an H2 or H3 section. Of course, you'll need to edit elements like font sizes and styles – but white space can also help forge a bond between different headers or paragraph text.

Source: wallmob

Hierarchy is what makes content easier to understand.

In this piece, we'll explore the relationship between distance and attention, then explain how to alternate spatial elements to create structure and visual personality.

tweet this Just like a king ranks higher than a prince, an H1 must appear more important than an H2 or H3 section.

Larger Distance Forces Attention

When you place more distance between page elements, you remove "stuff" that gets in the way. You can always use space to your advantage because it's not directly noticeable to most visitors. What stands out most is the content, so if you leave space between content, then only the content will draw attention.

When in doubt, it's often best to add *more* white space rather than less. Many websites suffer from cramming too much information together without enough breathing room. But this is just a general rule and shouldn't be taken as gospel. Like we described in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, excessive white space weakens your hierarchy by dissolving the relationships between elements.

Correct spatial proportions are only correct in context. What looks good on one layout may not look great on another. A delicate balance of space must be learned through practice and the study of existing website layouts.

Source: Apple

Take a look at the Apple iMac website. Many designers swoon over Apple's trademark simplicity expressed through all their products (including the human interface philosophies behind iOS and OS X). There's no doubt that Apple's main website also uses simplicity and white space to emphasize what's most important: the content!

tweet this   When you add distance between page elements,
you're forced to remove the stuff that gets in the way.

Heading text and graphics are supersized to occupy a vast majority of the page. As you scroll down, take note that other areas of the page use smaller blocks of text which are still clearly readable from a distance. The use of more space between lines of text makes it easier to skim content and keep scrolling without taking 2-3 minutes to read each section.

Source: Apple

If you quickly scroll down the page you'll notice a continual pattern. Each section uses an image and a block of text floating next to each other. But this pattern alternates with images on the right, then the left, and back to right again. It's a pattern of symmetry which makes the space feel more inviting and relaxed.

You can find another example on the homepage for Wunderlist. Some of the content is spaced towards the center while other areas use the floating effect like on Apple's website.

Source: Wunderlist

The Wunderlist top navigation is actually very small compared to most of the page content. Links are squeezed up into the top navigation bar while content sections are given wide open pastures of white space. This type of hierarchical design structure provides visual clues as to which areas of the page should draw attention.
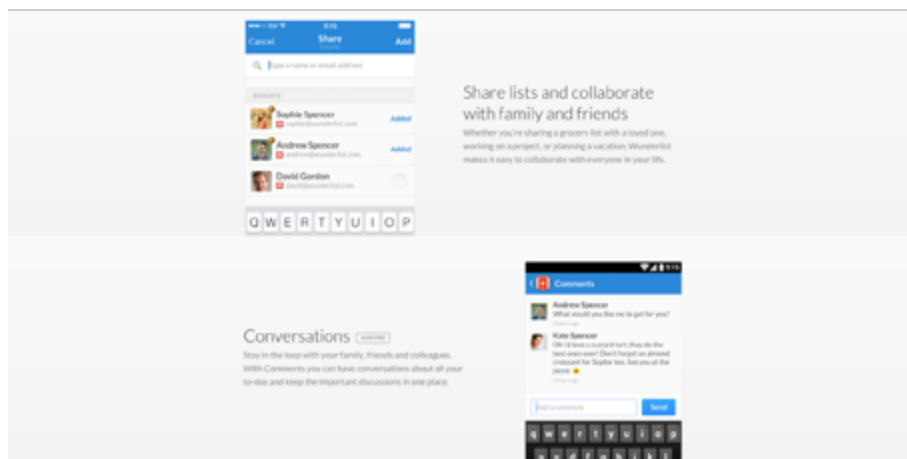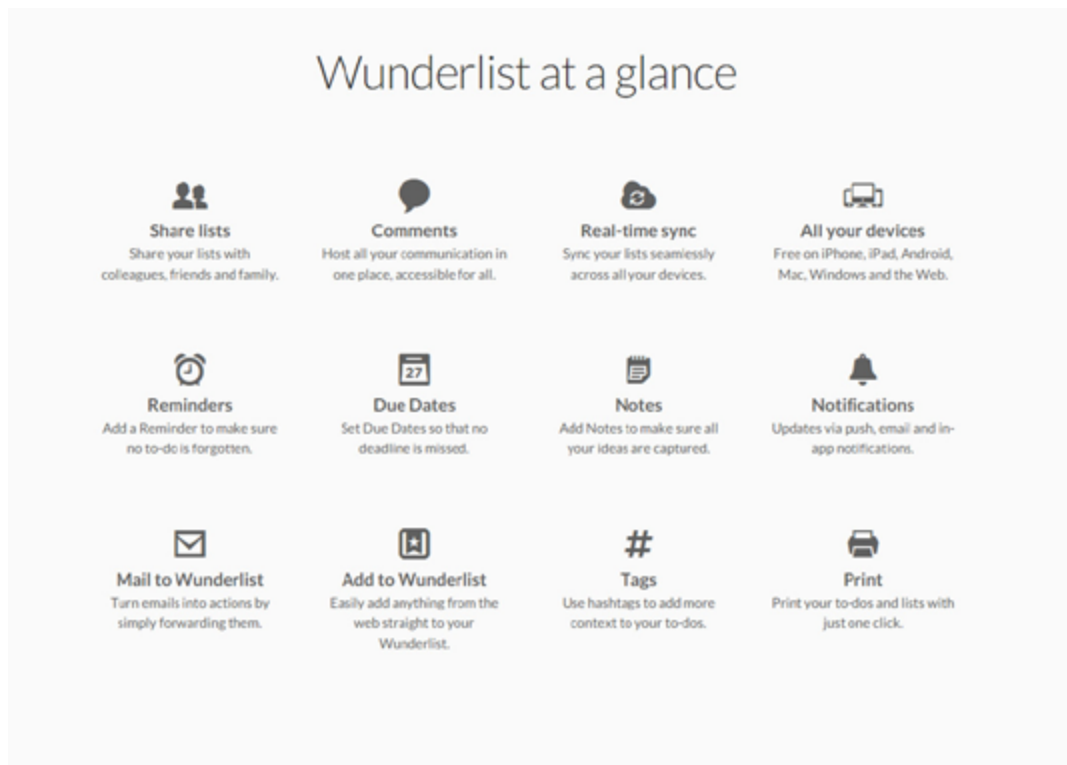

Source: Wunderlist

Now, as we move to the middle of the page, we can see a more asymmetrical pattern emerging in the white space.

On the surface, alternating content may seem annoying because you force the reader's gaze to jump around. But since the content is spaced out so well, it's much easier to read this Z-Pattern than you might first imagine. The pattern also forces visitors to stay on their toes since the design isn't spoon-feeding information. Of course, this pattern is only possible because the tasteful white space carves out the path for scanning.

The asymmetrical spacing is carefully executed so that it looks interesting without being infuriating.

Source: Wunderlist

Finally, at the very bottom of the page, Wunderlist places a series of 12 basic icons located above small blocks of text describing product features. The contrast created by dark text and white background draws your eyes to the content. Once you focus on the content, the symmetrical spacing between all 12 "blocks" creates a sense of unity. As a result, the whole section feels like one big connected area.

However, if you look internally, you'll also notice that each icon & block of text still feels like one individual "item". Everything remains connected thanks to symmetrical spacing while the icons add individual appeal to each "item". The reduced spacing between icons and bolded text (like the mailbox and "Mail to Wunderlist") strengthens the content with visual metaphors. As a result, visitors only need to skim these features to understand the gist of the whole section.

We can learn a lot from the design patterns demonstrated by Wunderlist's use of spacing:

- Asymmetry has its purpose when attempting to draw attention to certain areas of the page.

- Asymmetry in a repeating pattern becomes symmetry.

- Patterns of space between text or graphics will also appear as one larger pattern.

- White space should make browsing content easier and more predictable.

Alternating Spatial Elements

The previous examples from Apple & Wunderlist demonstrate that alternating patterns can become a pattern itself. While these may seem like asymmetrical designs on the surface, they really follow symmetrical patterns in the big picture.

Like we described in *Web UI Design for the Human Eye*, it's also just as useful to create asymmetry for the sake of asymmetry.

When an element uses asymmetrical space, it stands out against other surrounding elements. It will be appear more vibrant, which is particularly helpful if you're designing areas of a page where one link/button demands more attention than others.

Asymmetry isn't always about external relationships with margins, padding, or gutters. Asymmetry can also be concerned with the internal relationships like image thumbnails or text alignment. For example an image gallery may showcase 5 thumbnails where the middle thumb is slightly larger than the others, primarily used to capture attention. Asymmetry is great for bringing attention to a particular area on the page or a particular element in the page.

Let's look at closer look at asymmetry expressed through contrast, spacing, and other complementary design elements.

1. **Observable Contrast**

   By removing distractions, you force users to focus only on what's immediately visible. You might then apply design effects to these areas like background gradients or even jQuery animations. These effects can be used on one or two elements to make them stand out out from the others.
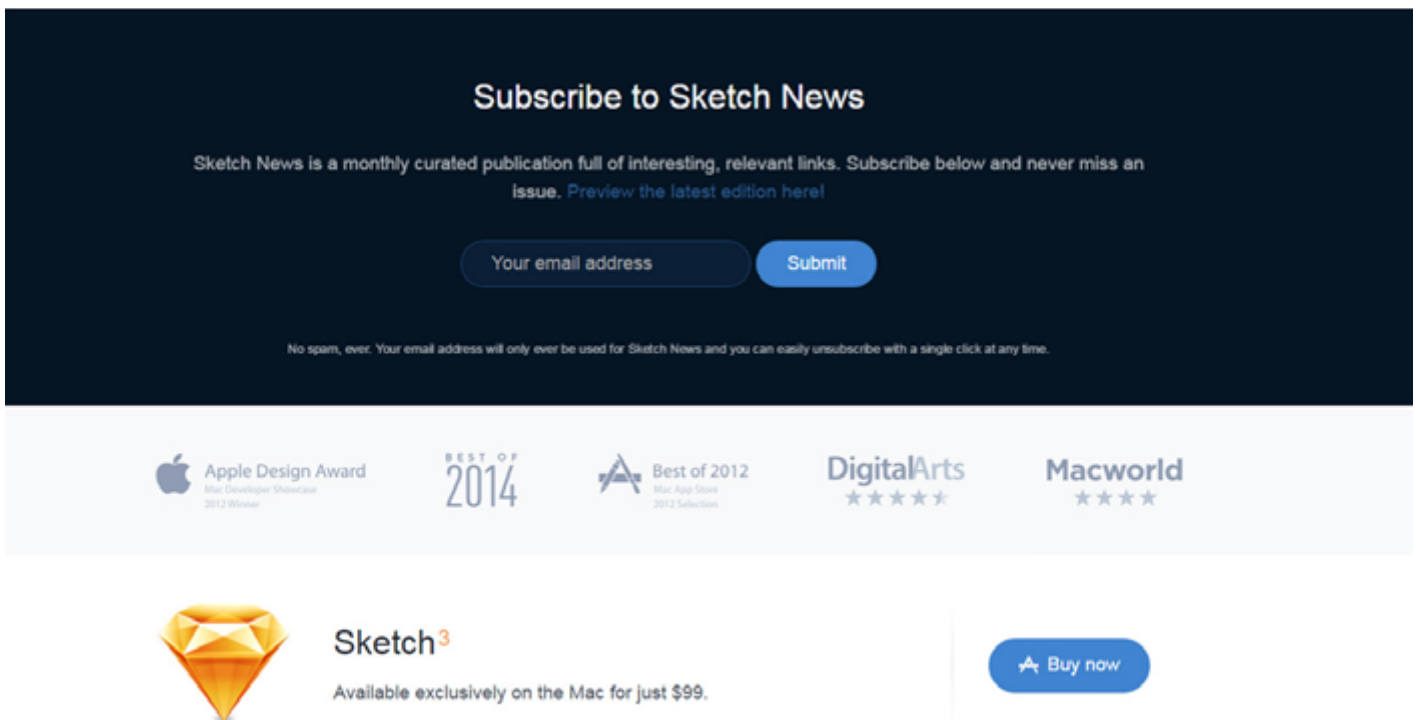

Source: Sketch App

One of our favorite examples of this effect lives on the homepage of SketchApp by Bohemian Coding. The homepage mixes dark and light colors to blend contrast into one unified layout.

In the header section, you'll notice there are two buttons: one for a free trial and the other for purchasing the software. Both of the buttons are colored blue and take up the same amount of space. However, the free trial button uses an "empty" background which is commonly referred to as a ghost button. Layered on top of the dark header, the free trial button seems to fall out of focus into the background.

Because the purchase button uses a light blue background and white text, it stands out strong and loud against the dark background. When quickly scanning your eyes over the header it's quite obvious that the purchase button draws your attention almost immediately. This is caused by color choices but also from white space added between the elements.

Vertical and horizontal white space is used so the buttons appear segregated from the header text. Since one button is brighter than the other, it naturally stands out since there's plenty of space and not much else in the way to capture attention.

You can see a similar button style in the footer area:

Source: *Sketch App*

Because Sketch wants you to submit your email as quickly as possible after typing it in, the spacing is much tighter between the input field and *Submit* button. This follows Fitts' Law since as you reduce distance (and size remains fixed), you speed up the time it takes to move between elements. Finally, notice that the asymmetrical size of the input form compared to the *Submit* button also draws your eyes to that part of the page, which is exactly what Sketch wants.

Use white space to your advantage to draw wandering eyes onto certain page elements. To experiment and discover what works best, try different methods of A/B testing for different values of spacing.

Here are some general notes to be cleaned from Sketch's website:

- Contrast doesn't always refer to color. It may also refer to contrasting elements of space, size, and position relative to other elements on the page.

- Empty space can be either obvious or inconspicuous depending on context.

- Surrounding elements play a large role in the natural visibility of other elements.

- White space produces either symmetry or asymmetry. Symmetry creates memory and harmony, while asymmetry draws attention. Balance both accordingly.

2. **Space Drives Attention**

You can find a slightly different example on the homepage for Procreate, a digital drawing and painting tool for the iPad. By skimming the page, you'll notice the whole layout is dark and features vastly oversized page elements.
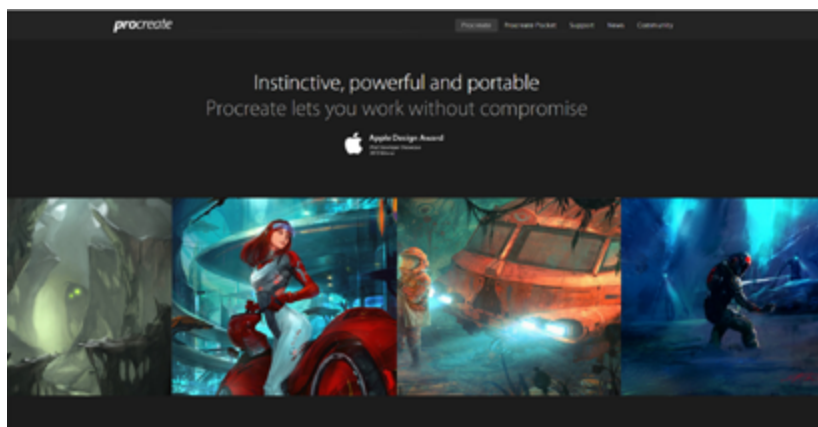
Source: Procreate

The design works well because it demonstrates how you can draw focus to singular elements on a very large page. Screenshots, demo paintings, and features all take up their own sections.

White space is used between text and between image galleries to keep the content separated. The design is especially noteworthy in its use of text colors to distinguish between headers (higher contrast) and general page text (lower contrast).
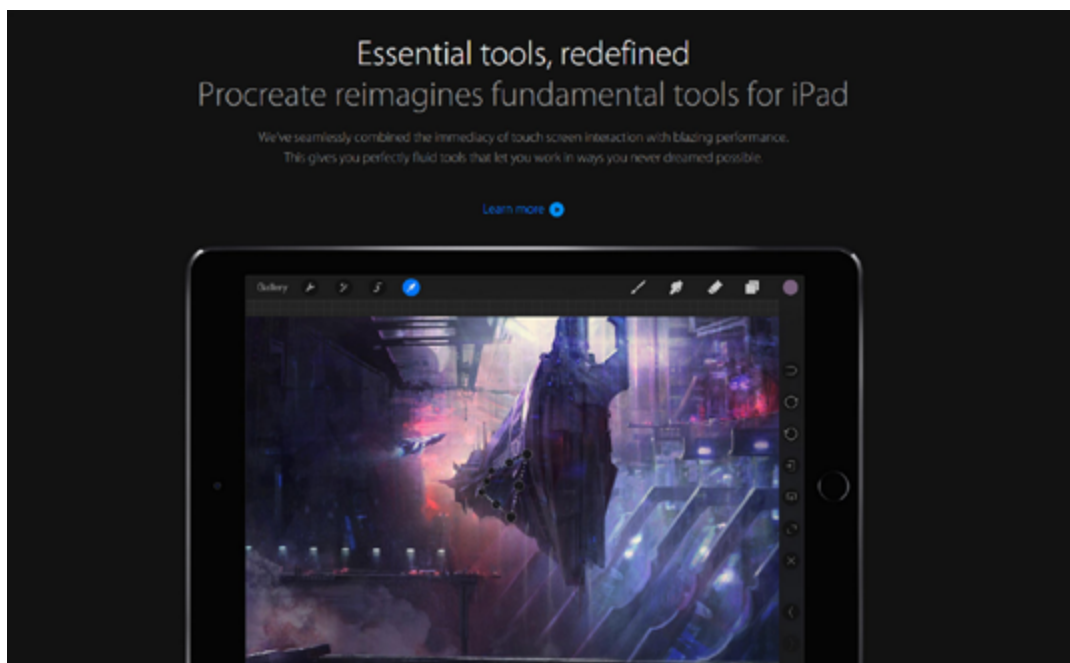

Source: Procreate

By splitting a page into sections you create a natural content hierarchy. By then dividing these sections with unique styles(fullscreen backgrounds, oversized typography, app screenshots) the divisions become even more apparent. Keep in mind that not all websites can benefit from large divisions of content – but this does seem to be a very popular trend amongst designers looks fantastic when executed properly.

Creating Luxury with Space

Although white space is often considered a technique for improving UX and usability, it can also be used for aesthetic purposes. Many websites incorporate white space as part of the design style because it flows well and reflects the brand accurately.

Most layouts which benefit from aesthetic white space are designed to focus solely on content without any distractions. Content may be concise as with minimalist layouts, or it could be lengthy and detailed. Eccentric use of white space as a design feature creates a lofty, spacious atmosphere which resonates over the entire website.
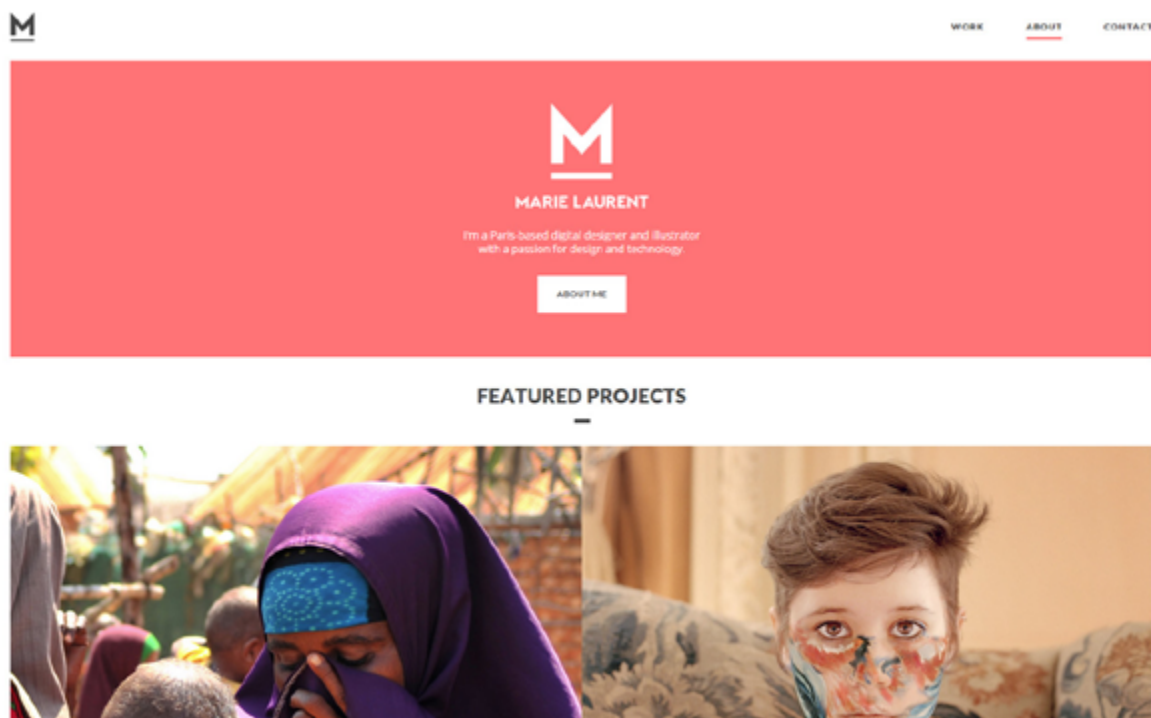

Source: *Marie Laurent*

Take a look at the portfolio website of Marie Laurent. Her homepage uses a minimalist design style with flat colors, generic typography,

and plenty of white space. The layout is built around content sections which draw your attention almost immediately.

Notice how most of the homepage is taken up by her design work. The actual portfolio examples are the most vital component and therefore should draw the most attention. In the content areas, white space separates text, buttons, and navigation links.

tweet this — Eccentric white space as a design feature creates a lofty, spacious atmosphere which resonates over the entire website.
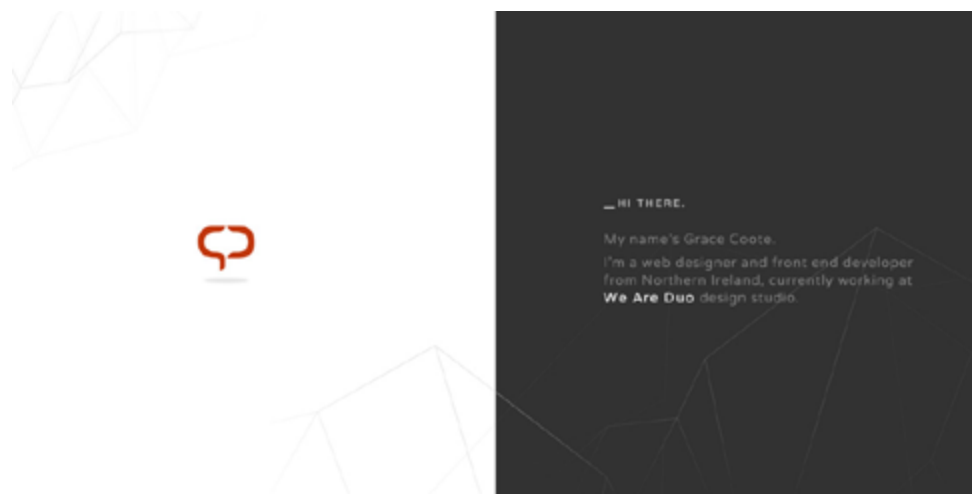

Source: *Grace Coote*

Aesthetic white space also plays a strong role in single-page layouts. Websites like Grace Coote use excessive white space to balance content sections. All of the website's content can be found on the homepage, so the design uses extra white space to cultivate distance.

Extra space alleviates the amount of content displayed onscreen at any given moment. Since users won't be navigating to other pages (it

is a single page design, after all), there is no harm in using a slightly longer scrollbar. The best part about Grace Coote's layout is the overall balance. Even though it's only a single page, it feels very modern and easy to use without lacking content or design features.
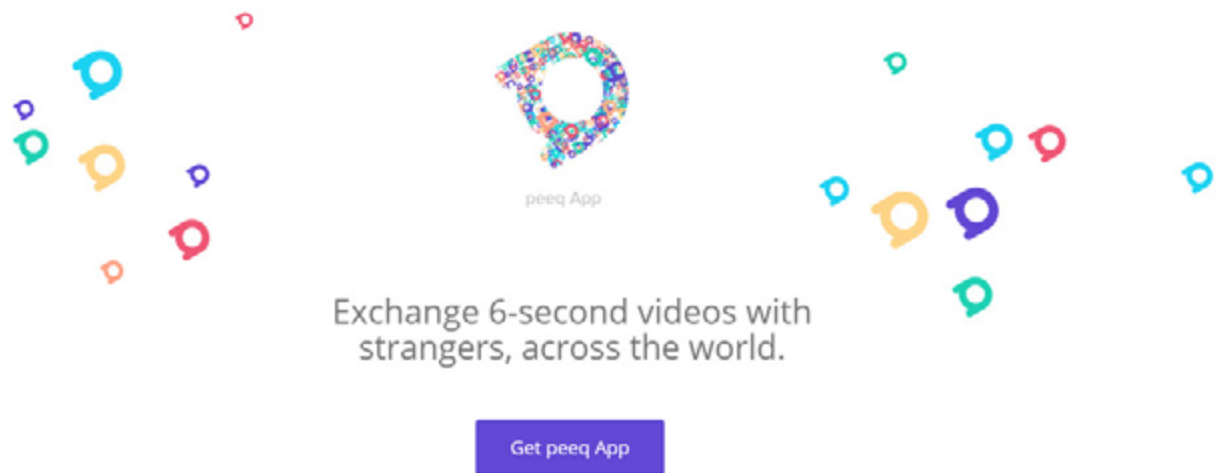
Source: Peeq App

The landing page for Peeq App is another single-page layout with minimalist design qualities. Everything about this design screams white space. Typography, imagery, and buttons stand out against the barren background design.

However, the site feels anything but empty.

Instead, the content takes center stage and feels easily accessible. In this sense, enhancing the aesthetics also improves the usability since the principles of emotional design state that attractive things feel like they work better. The site design highlights the bright colors without distracting from the clear headline or "Get peeq App" call to action.

Takeaway

Content hierarchy is not solely built on negative space. Space is a vital piece of the puzzle, but other design fundamentals are required to truly incorporate a visual hierarchy. These fundamentals include colors, font choices and typography, similarity and contrast, and graphics placed within the content.

The space found between everything is what dictates relationships and balance. When first creating a new mockup, you will probably struggle for a little while unless you're already an experienced designer.

Truly internalizing how much white space should be used to create a visual hierarchy **requires practice**, which means it requires failure. Messing up is big part of the learning process and the more you design, the more you'll learn.

Creating Structured Content & Typography

Earlier we explained building hierarchies in the "big picture" of a website's composition. But as you move into typography, you also must create hierarchies related to specific text on the page.
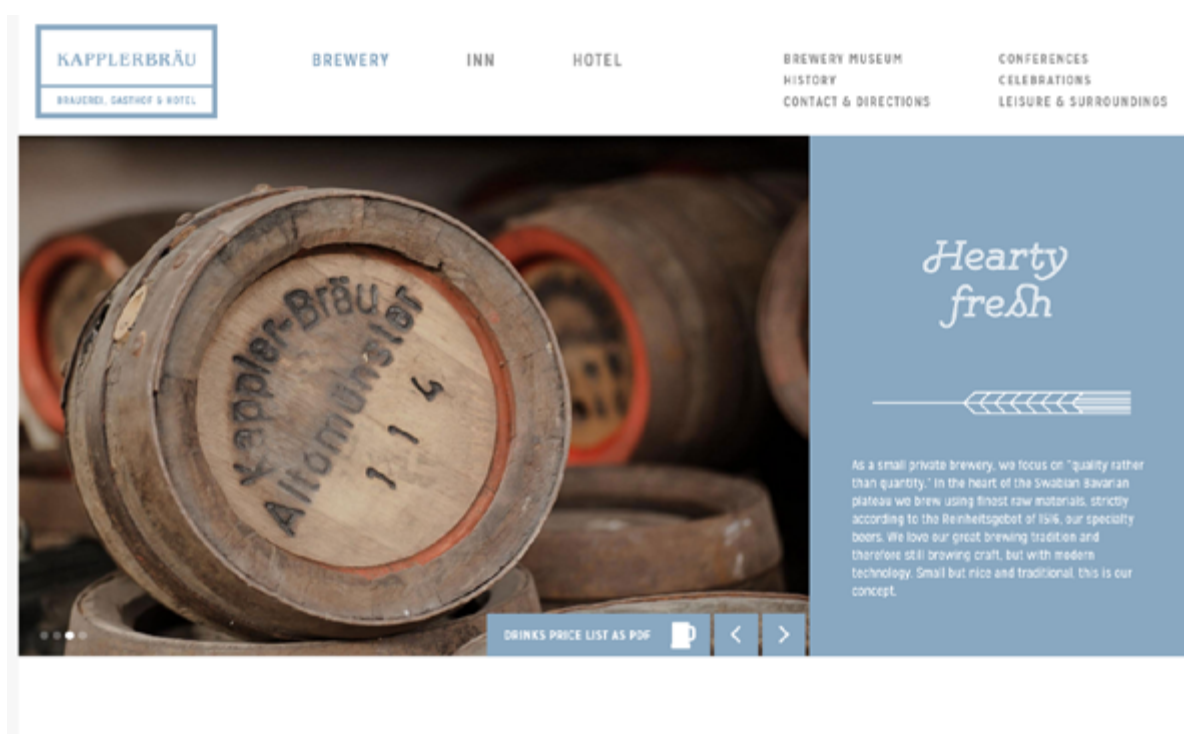
Web content typically focuses around just a couple of different text elements. Headings range from H1-H6 but most websites only use

H1-H4 at most. Regardless of how many heading styles are used, it's your job as a designer to craft them in a way so the hierarchy is clearly established.

Space between text is important because it helps to define the page content itself. When users find a new header, they expect to recognize if content is switching to a brand new subject or if it's within an existing subject. The right combination of size, color, and style of heading text helps to create the right expectations for users.

Negative space between text shows how page content is related. Headers with plenty of space are seen as more dominant while headers closer to paragraphs are seen as related via context. Bottom margins after paragraphs show the relationship between lines of text and where they belong in the hierarchy. It all relates back to crafting a hierarchy of content to visually distinguish between text on the page.

In this piece, we'll explain creating relationships with your headers, creating clear relationships through contrast, using white space in navigation menus, and how to use white space to make lengthy paragraphs visually digestible.

Heading Relationships

Each heading should reflect it's own unique style which also complements other styles of text on the page. Crafting brilliant headers gets easier with practice, but white space values should generally behave the same regardless of heading styles.
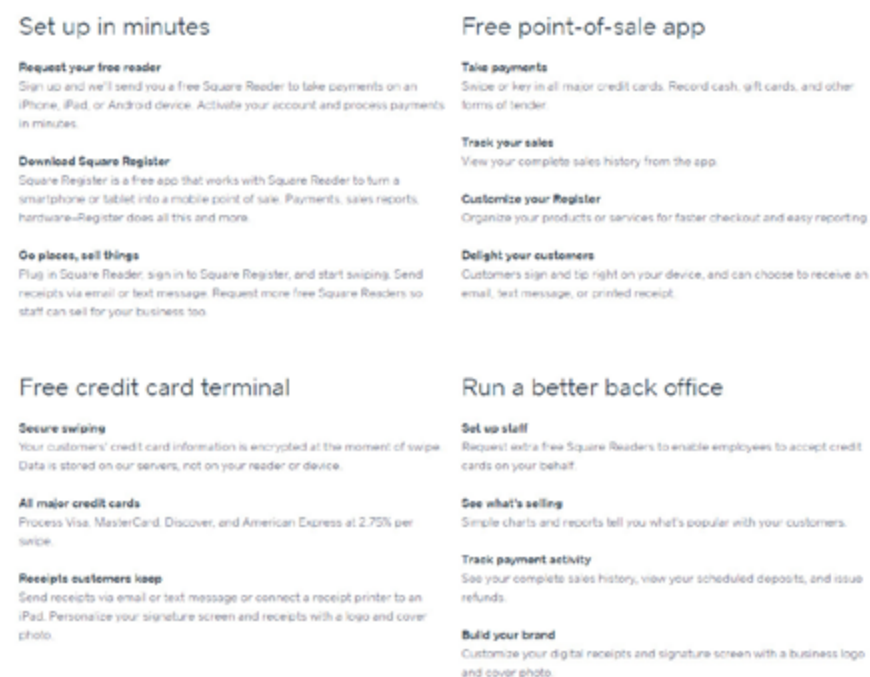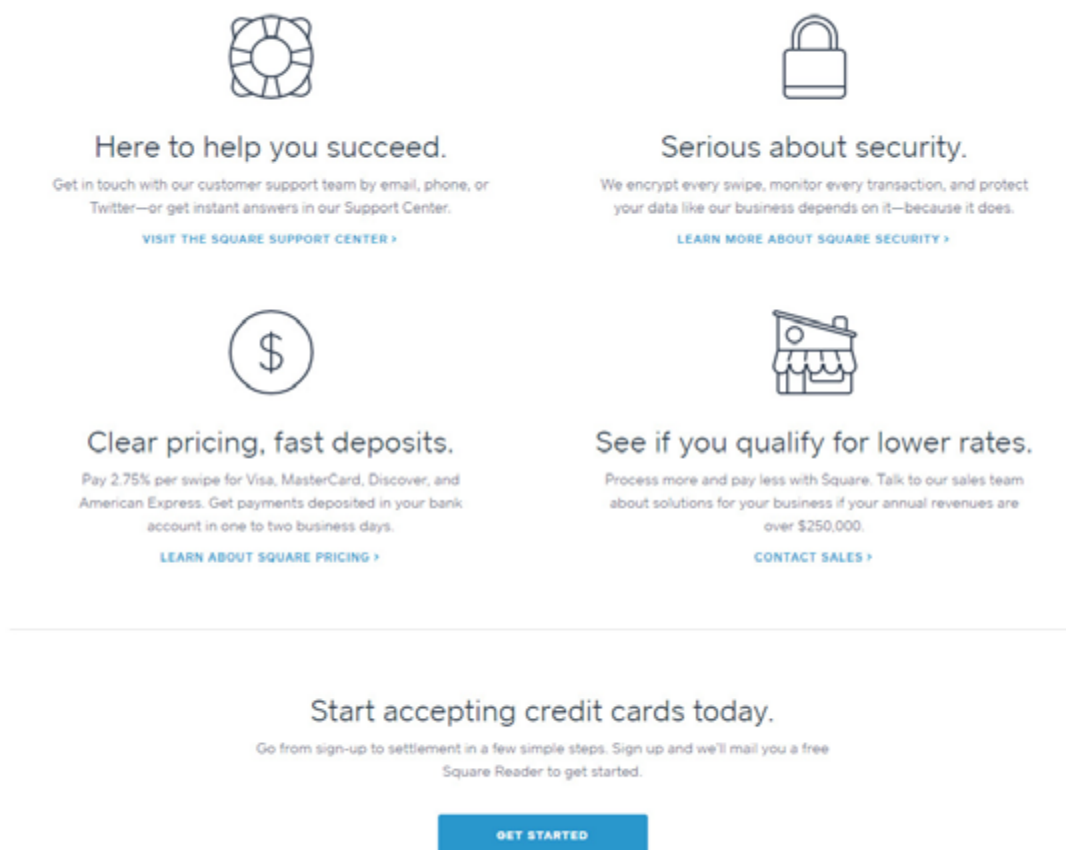

Source: Square

Square uses a traditional startup homepage layout with plenty of imagery and blocks of text. Headings are a particularly interesting segment of the design because they range from oversized to infinitesimally small. Yet the size doesn't really matter as much as the relationship to other text on the page.

Notice in the screenshot above how large headings use extra space above and below the text. These section headings visually convey a

sense of being "on their own", yet also naturally group together into larger blocks of sub-headings and paragraphs.

Each inner block uses sub-header text which is much smaller. These internal headers are about the same size as paragraph text but they stand out with bold text & a darker color. Visually, it's still crystal-clear that these bolded lines of text are still headings (just lower on the visual totem pole).

Source: Square

The amount of space between headers & paragraphs also defines which paragraphs belong to which headers. Similarly, you should insert plenty of space between smaller headers and larger headers.

Again, negative space defines hierarchy both in visual design and in typography.

Take these ideas into account when crafting page headers:

- A visual hierarchy should be apparent through the use of space, size, color, and/or text style. This should be visible even when standing 3-5 feet away from the monitor. As described in *Web UI Best Practices*, you can also use the 5-second Gaussian blur test to check hierarchy.

- Keep each sub-header close to its first child paragraph.

- Place in close proximity with pithy headers to convey ideas more quickly and clearly.

Contrasting Effects

Another technique for building a visual relationship is the use of contrast. As mentioned in *Web UI Design for the Human Eye*, whatever stands out from other text will only draw more attention. So, the use of balanced white space can build a foundation where text feels like it's naturally a part of something.

Let's examine how to apply contrast to group and call attention to content.

1. Contrast for Grouping

The footer design of Lever is a perfect example of using contrast to create groups of content. All footer links are split up into vertical columns aligned side-by-side.

Even though the horizontal spacing between columns is different, the white text in the first item of each column (like *Navigation*) overcomes the asymmetry. As a result, we experience an illusory effect where we can still see the columns form one large footer section.
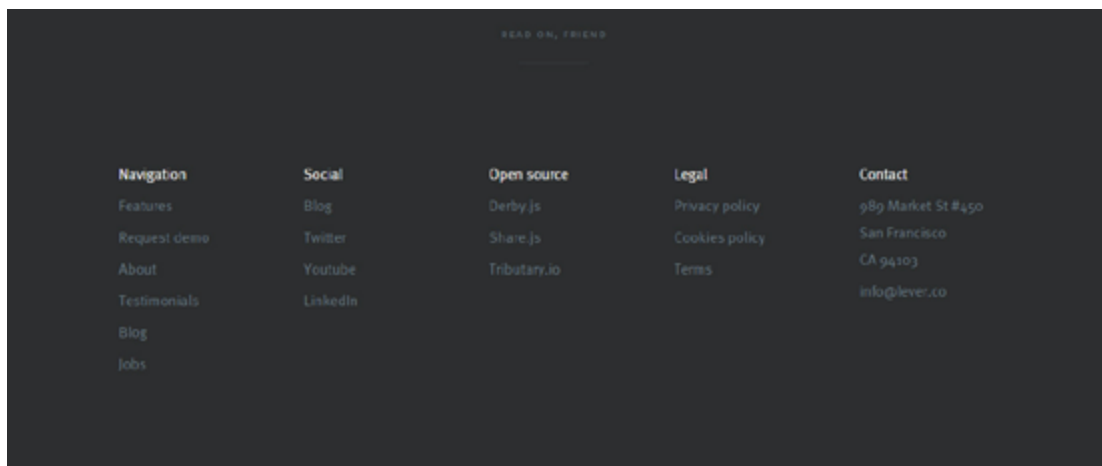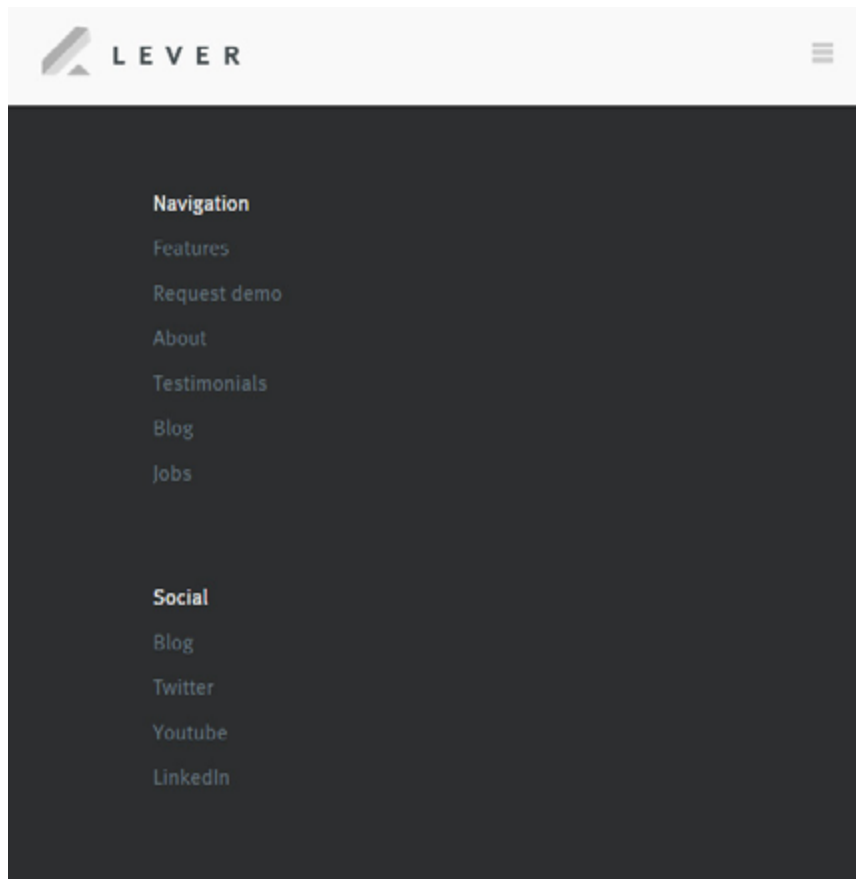

Source: Lever

Now let's look at each individual column. From a vertical perspective, we can again witness the power of contrast. Notice that the vertical spacing between each link in the footer (like *Navigation* and *Features*) is identical. The contrast from the white text, however, forces us to first look at the header before perusing any links.

The most interesting point here is the white space is found both vertically and horizontally. The horizontal space is much greater than vertical space found between the links.

The spacing combined with contrast draws our attention to the white links while preserving our understanding that all the links are related. No "Footer" label or any other effects are necessary, allowing us to maintain the minimalist design.

Source: Lever

As dictated by the Uniform Connectedness principle, elements which are closer together appear related.

Lever is a responsive website and when you resize the layout, these footer columns all drop vertically. When viewing the smaller responsive layout, the design adapts by creating more vertical space between the footer columns. As a result, the user can still see where one list ends and another begins.

2. Contrast for Attention

Another similar effect is visible in the footer area of Geckoboard's website. It uses 3 link columns, but instead of giving headers more contrast, only the important links (like *Product*, *Benefits*, and *Pricing*) stand out in clear white text.
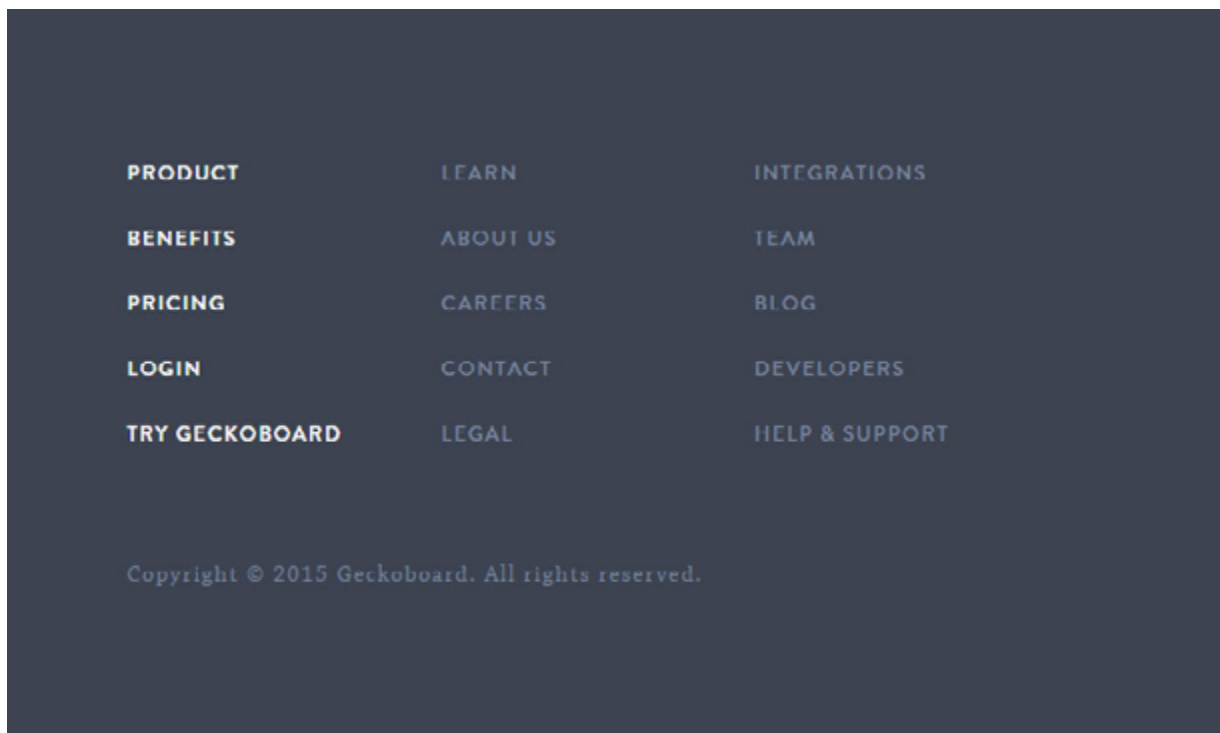
Source: *Geckoboard*

Negative space in the footer is both compositional and textual. The footer itself is quite large but the link text is spaced both horizontally and vertically. As a result, the generous space allows each link to almost feels like an individual block of text.

The link text style also uses all-caps with a bit of **letter-spacing** added via CSS. All this extra space between columns, links, and individual letters creates a spacious feeling. Contrast defines higher-level text and extra space conveys the relationship between groups of links.

Remember that white space is universal and footers are not the only areas which can benefit. Headers, sidebars, and even in-page content can use white space and high/low contrast to build contextual relationships.

Try skimming How To Direct a Reader's Eye to learn more about drawing attention through UI design.

Navigation Menus

Almost all websites require some form of primary and secondary navigation unless they're only single-page designs. In fact, as you can see in this excellent gallery, many single-page layouts still use some form of stripped down navigation – whether it's a simple top-level horizontal menu or a hamburger menu.

Interestingly, the white space found in a navigation can vary wildly. It's all based on content density and how many links must fit into a single navigation. Many of the examples shown earlier are just simple landing pages with a few links. The less content on the landing page, the more creative control you can exercise in the navigation layout – for example, designing navigation links as either large typography blocks or cramming them into a corner.

But when structuring a more complicated web UI, you'll need a stricter plan of attack. Take for example Microsoft's homepage which

supports links for all of their products. As we all know, the design of Microsoft's site must account for its enormous breadth of products ranging from tablets to Xbox consoles and games. It's a very delicate balancing act.
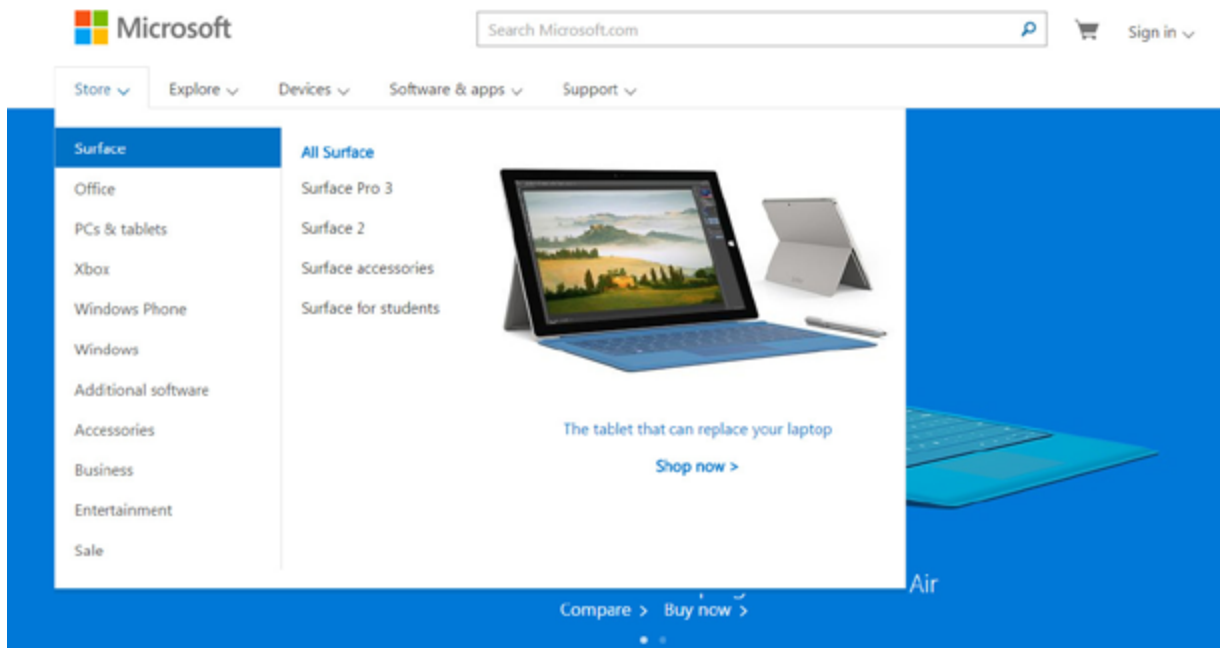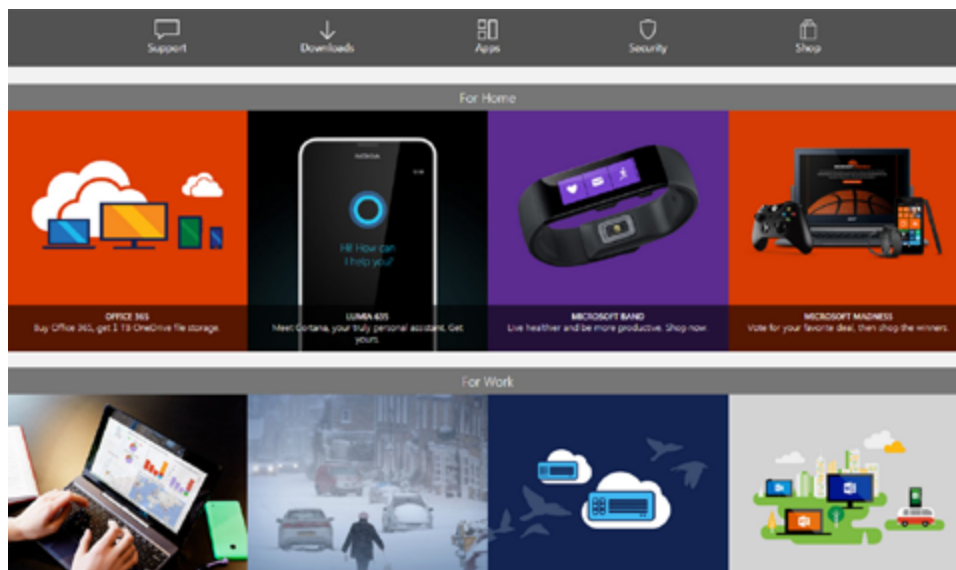

Source: Microsoft

Their navigation menu features a series of links with dropdown menus. Each dropdown list uses a flyout secondary menu with tertiary product links. Needless to say, Microsoft's website has a lot of content.

The great part about their navigation is the exquisite use of white space. All of the links in their dropdown behave like block-level elements with plenty of padding. Visitors can hover anywhere over the link area and it will become clickable. By following Fitts' Law in creating large targets for navigation links, this design is perfect from a UX perspective because it makes navigating the site smooth and easy.

Readability tends to increase when adding more space between text, so err on the side of extra space when you place dozens of links together in the same menu. In this case, generous white space helps to offset the decision paralysis effects of too many interface objects as described by Hick's Law.

Source: Microsoft

What's even more interesting is that Microsoft includes a few other smaller menus further down the page. These are much simpler with just a few links and related icons, but they're still a way to get visitors digging deeper into the site.
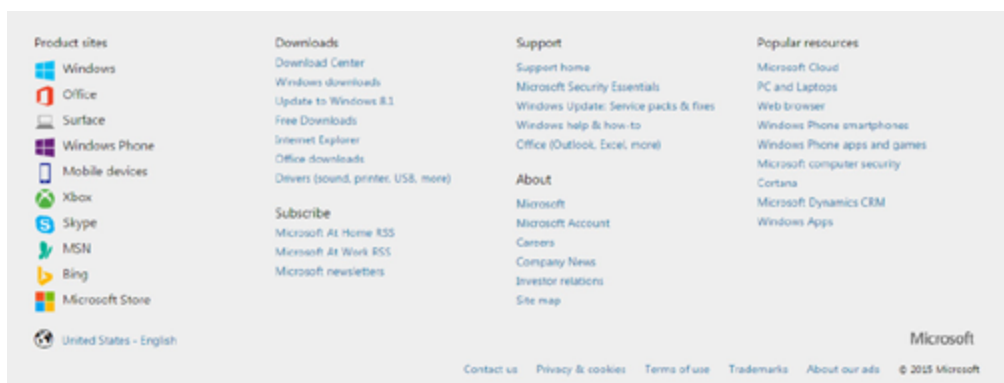
Source: Microsoft

When designing a navigation menu, always think about content density. How much content needs to be available in this portion of the website? The answer will offer a glimpse into some of your options for navigation design, and thus how much white space must be available. Some tips for styling nav menus:

- Adjust font size & space according to the number of links.

- Smaller links can still draw attention through contrast or with a scrolling navbar.

- Extra space leaves more room for links to stand out. Consider space both vertically and horizontally to create "link blocks".

- Different page sections call for different white space values. A website's top navigation may be wildly dissimilar to the footer navigation.

If you're interested in learning more about navigation best practices, we highly recommend this 5-part series on **Smashing Magazine**.

Lengthy Paragraphs

Finally, on the topic of contextual white space, lies the question of how to design around the common paragraph. Firm, reliable, and found pretty much everywhere, the paragraph is the backbone of every website's content strategy.

But how content is written varies based on how content is styled. For example, an online news magazine will use different paragraph styles than a smaller gardening blog. The amount of content, length of content, and level of detail all come into play when styling paragraphs.

Try to design with large enough text so that it's clearly readable 3 feet away from the screen. Text size is very similar to white space in that it's usually better to design larger than smaller. However, exercise moderation and restraint.

If the text size is too large, then it'll just take up more screen space and require more scrolling. But if it's too small it could be unreadable, or visitors will experience difficulty with vertical rhythm as they move their eyes from line-to-line.

Two important things to keep in mind are paragraph margins and line height (the space between each line). The size of text in your paragraphs dictates both of these values because white space depends on size.

Introduction

As part of to [icon] here are a of my few musings about how to get started in icon design. Don't get me wrong, I'm not the be-all-end-all expert on designing icons, but if practice makes perfect, than I'm getting pretty darn close. Step one is going to be admitting that designing okay icons is easy, and great icons, is remarkably harder, you as a designer are going to have to choose what side of the fence you want to sit on.

Designing great icons is a challenge. To be successful you will not only need to create (or make use of) strong metaphors, pick the right level of detail, and then somehow on top of that, create visual language or style.

One of your biggest challenges as the designer of a 100+ set of icons (coming from experience here) will be constancy. That said, applying a formula of sorts will not necessarily make an icon set awesome. I find the the best way to think about a icon set is to use the analogy of a family. Just as a family they may have similarities, same eye colour, hair colour, body shape, face shape, but, by no means are they clones. Some of the icons will be naturally stronger, some weaker, but all of them have references to one another. Whats important is that together they make sense as a set, and have thoughtful ties with the addition or exclusion of little details. Having a point of view will also be important to make icons that have personality and are individual. A well considered icon set should be similar to having a family of icons, they might not be identical, but in a line up, they need to look and feel like they belong together.

Source: Medium

Medium is an online blogging platform which does paragraph design right. The text is crisp, readable, and spaced perfectly. As their paragraph design shows, line height values must be large enough to connect to the next line without feeling excessive. Here are some good rules of thumb to follow:

- Avoid making the line height larger than a typical line of text.

- The em font unit is perfect for creating uniform sizes across all browsers.

- Line height should often be a tad larger than font size.

- Try a font size of 1 em combined with a line height of 1.5 em–1.75 em.

Paragraph spacing can be tricky but it's an important topic, especially for text-heavy websites. The bottom paragraph margin should be much larger than a typical line of text. Bottom paragraph margins should be large enough that you can visually determine when a paragraph has ended.

Once you figure out a website's text size, it becomes much easier to play with line height values and figure out margins for spacing. The goal here is clarity and structure. Each new paragraph should be obvious without any doubt. The key is proportional space between each block of text.

As mentioned before, it's generally safer to have "too much" white space rather than not enough. Just avoid using colossal amounts of space or you'll end up with a very shallow content density. Keep enough content on the page to be interesting, but not so much that it's overwhelming.

To learn more about designing for content in web interfaces, check out this piece on how to design the perfect paragraph.

Takeaway

Negative space in typography directly affects the overall composition and smaller page elements at the same time. When designing typography, context is king.

Paragraphs found in the page may need larger margins than paragraphs found in the sidebar. Links in the header could look smoother with extra padding, but links in the footer could look tidier with very little padding. There are no solid rules, only best practices to keep in mind.

Also remember that typography follows along with its own hierarchy just like page structure. Use white space to emphasize certain areas or group together small blocks of text. Lots of practice will be the optimal way to improve your eyes for quickly recognizing spatial values that fit best into any given web project.

When it comes to designing with space, remember that space as an aesthetic quality takes a backseat to space as a design tool. Space creates relationships, defines hierarchies, and emphasizes content – always keep these in mind when considering how to reduce visual noise.

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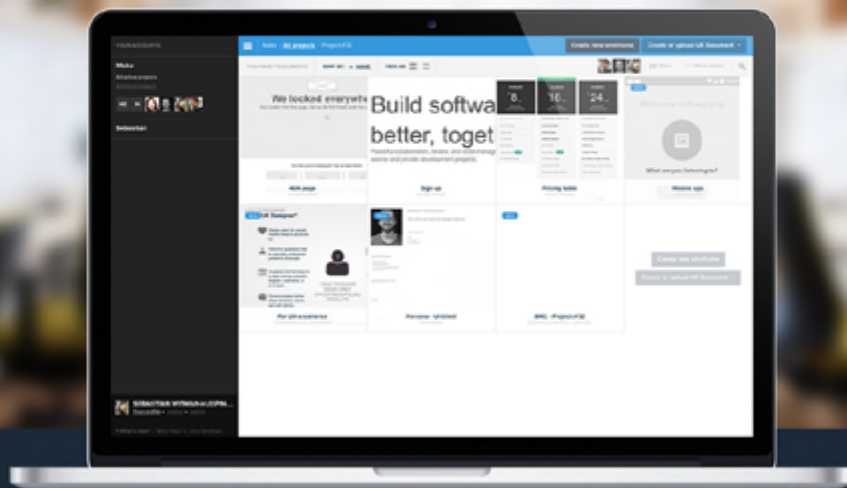
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